



The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 151

June 2024



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The John Clare Society Instagram Site:

<https://www.instagram.com/johnclaresocietyofficial/>

The John Clare Society Website:

<https://johnclaresociety.wordpress.com/>

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Cover artwork: Carry Akroyd

Annual General Meeting

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society will take place on Saturday 13 July 2024 at 10am in St. Botolph's Church, Helpston. All members and those attending the Festival are cordially invited.

John Goodridge to be next President of the John Clare Society.

We are absolutely delighted that Professor John Goodridge has accepted our invitation to become our next President following the resignation of Carry Akroyd. Carry has done much to help the Society during her 10 years as President and we are very grateful to her. John, who has been an active member of the Society for many years, will be, I am sure, another excellent President. Below is a short curriculum vitae.

John Goodridge is Emeritus Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University, with a special interest in early labouring-class poets. He joined the John Clare Society nearly forty years ago, editing its *Journal* for fifteen of them, and has written extensively on the poet. He now edits the online 'Catalogue of Labouring Class Poets' and is currently co-editing a book of essays on working-class and radical writing for the University of London Press.

**Sue Holgate
Chairman**

RENEWAL OF MEMBERSHIP 2024-2025

Membership fees are now due. If you pay by standing order there is nothing you need to do.

I am happy to accept cheques (made payable to The John Clare Society) if that is your preferred method of payment.

Alternatively, you can pay by bank transfer:

Sort code 20-07-82

Account no. 50275239

Reference: your surname

If you do this please could you send me an email as well.

If you can't remember whether you have set up a standing order or want to set one up do please email me.

The rates remain at £15 for an individual and £20 for joint membership.

Dr Valerie Pedlar, Membership Secretary
20 Delamere Road, Southport, R8 2RD
vpedlar@yahoo.co.uk



The John Clare Festival: July 12 and 13 2024

This year we are having a two-day Festival, starting on **Friday July 12** with the traditional laying of the Midsummer Cushions on John Clare's grave, from **1pm**. The entire John Clare Primary School will be going to St. Botolph's Church in class groups and everyone is invited to attend – parents,

grandparents, carers, friends, siblings, anyone else living locally, and visitors. It is always a happy occasion. The Cushions' ceremony will be followed by the awarding of prizes in the annual Poetry Competition, in the church. All of the entries will be available to view inside the church over the weekend and for several days afterwards. To end the day there will be a Choral Evensong in St. Botolph's Church at **6pm** and then a lively evening at the John Clare Cottage with local folk musicians from **7.30pm**. Please come along; everyone is welcome.

On **Saturday July 13**, John Clare's birthday, the John Clare Society's AGM will take place in St. Botolph's Church from **10am** for about an hour. This will be followed at **11am** by a fascinating talk by the Rector, Gary Alderson, on Rev. Charles Mossop, one-time vicar of St Botolph's and a friend of Clare's.

In the afternoon there will be lunches available in the village hall and at the John Clare Cottage, which will also be open on that day for tours of the house and garden (entrance charges apply). There will be many things to do and see in the afternoon, and to end the day a concert by The Black Smock Band who are coming all the way from Brighton to provide this year's entertainment. This will have an early start of **5pm** so that anyone attending can travel on to their home, accommodation, or go out for an evening meal afterwards.

The whole weekend is free to attend and is open to members and non-members of the Society. Tickets for the Concert will be £8 each, 2 adults for £15, family tickets £13 (1 adult and up to 3 children) or £20 (2 adults and up to 3 children).

Concert tickets will be available from **1 June**. To book a seat in advance please:

either email Sue Holgate – smholgate@outlook.com – with your request and pay by BACS with your surname and 'concert' as a reference (preferred) – bank details below.

Or send a cheque payable to the John Clare Society together with your name to Sue Holgate, 9 The Chase, Ely, Cambs CB6 3DR.

Your tickets will be available to collect at the Welcome Tent or at the Church door before the concert.

John Clare Society Bank details
Barclays Bank
Sort Code 20-07-82
Account Number 50275239

The provisional timetable for the Festival is as follows:

Friday July 12

1–3pm Midsummer Cushions and Poetry Prize Giving at St. Botolph's Church.
6pm Choral Evensong at the Church
7.30pm Folk Evening at the John Clare Cottage. Bar open

Saturday July 13

10am AGM in St. Botolph's Church
11–12 Talk by Gary Alderson on Rev. Mossop in the Church
11.30 John Clare Cottage open
12–2 Lunches in the Village Hall and Cottage
12–1 Children's activities at the Cottage
1.15–2.45 Poetry Reading in the Church – bring your favourite poem
2–4 Open Gardens in the village
3–4.15 Walk organised by the Langdyke Trust
3–5 Teas in the Village Hall
5pm Concert in St. Botolph's Church

For more information

Ann Marshall, Festival Organiser

E-mail annmarshall2@btinternet.com or phone 07815 640033

CURRENTLY IN COMMITTEE...

Hello everyone,

Welcome to our first 'Currently in Committee' for 2024! I'm pleased to be able to share with you some insights into our activities as a Committee, following our February meeting.

As usual, the meeting was held in Peterborough, with an on-line meeting option for those who were unable to attend in person. In addition to our standard agenda items, such as a review and update on actions agreed at the previous meeting, Officers' reports etc, we had a very full agenda with some new additions as well as updating some previous initiatives.

Lauren Kendrick

We were very pleased to welcome Lauren Kendrick as a guest to our meeting. Lauren, who is the Poet Laureate for Peterborough and a Landworker, told us about the plans for a number of events during the year, to cover the Enclosures Act, modern landwork, and the right to roam. Details will appear on the Peterborough Museum website in due course.

John Clare Festival 2024

This year's Festival will be a pared-down event compared to previous years. Whilst most of the events will continue for members and visitors to enjoy,

unfortunately we have needed to look carefully at what can be achieved by the limited number of Festival Planning Group members, and so the paper Programme available to members on the day will provide basic information only, and will consequently be free of charge. The theme for the children of John Clare Primary School poetry competition this year is 'My Favourite Story Character' – if the standard is as high this year as it was last, we are all in for a real treat!

New John Clare Society Book

The Committee were excited to review a proposal for a new John Clare book, to be produced by the Society. It was agreed that we will publish a book entitled *Clare's People*, to follow up *The Wood is Sweet* (2005) and *This Happy Spirit* (2013). It was also agreed that the theme should be the people in Clare's world; essentially a collection of poems depicting the people that Clare writes about, from those in the fields to those in the manor houses and beyond. The likely date for publication is the summer of 2025, so look out for further updates!

John Clare Society President

We were very sorry to hear of Carry Akroyd's resignation from her post as President. Carry has done so much for the Society during her 10 year tenure, for which the Society is hugely grateful. The Committee discussed who may be a suitable replacement for Carry, and it was agreed that Professor John Goodridge should be approached and offered the role. John is Emeritus Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University, with a special interest in early labouring-class poets. He joined the John Clare Society almost 40 years ago and was our Journal Editor for 15 of those years. We were delighted to hear that John subsequently accepted the invitation to become our next President, and look forward to working alongside him in this capacity.

Introducing...

This time, it is my huge pleasure to introduce you to the lovely lady who welcomed me to the Festival Planning Group in 2019; and then offered me the opportunity to succeed her in the role of Secretary for the John Clare Society Committee in 2022, when she took the reins of Chair – Sue Holgate:

Why did you join the John Clare Society Committee?

Many years ago I became interested in John Clare – a friend of my flatmate, who was Director of the Cambridge and Isle of Ely Naturalist Trust (now the Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust), introduced her to one of Clare's poems – 'The Thrushes Nest' – and we were hooked! So we began going to Festivals, held at Helpston School in those days. The then Chairman, Rodney Lines, pleaded for a secretary so I offered. I was a secretary by profession, having worked at Addenbrooke's Hospital, and for the Bishop of Ely. After a year or two I also became Membership Secretary which, I must say, was quite an onerous task as we had over 500 members. Thankfully this was eventually taken over by Bob Heyes.

I have also helped organise the annual Festival for a few years but we now need a few local people to help organise this for the future.

So, after many years I was elected Chair, taking over from Val Pedlar. This is quite a different experience and I am finding it very interesting. I am quite happy not having to type the Minutes after every Committee meeting!

What do you enjoy about being on the Committee?

Our Committee are a very friendly and committed group. Some of us are very experienced in Clare studies and over the years I have learnt a lot about John Clare and his enthusiasm and love for the natural world. One of my aims during my time as Chair is to set up a new interactive website which has now begun to be developed. I am also keen to try and arrange a John Clare/George Crabbe study day in Helpston.



What do you do outside of the John Clare Society Committee and Festival?

I love everything to do with the countryside and do a lot of walking and bird-watching. I am fascinated by botany and am a member of the U3A Ely Botany Group. There is nothing more exciting than to look closely into a wildflower with a magnifying glass and marvel at its beauty. I am also involved with the Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust, which gives loans and grants to churches to help them conserve their buildings – so church architecture is another of my passions.

'Currently in Committee', edited by Karen Lakey

MEMBERSHIP NOTES:

We should like to welcome the following new members who have joined the Society since the last issue of the Newsletter:

Stephen 'Bob' Curry: Birmingham
Joanna Burrows: Uppingham
Melanie Brown: Mount Hawk
John Wright: Dobbs Ferry, USA
Mark Casciani: Dublin
Kathy East: Colchester

Kevin Acott: London
Mary Bailey: Colchester
Graham Lloyd: Boston (Lincs)
Tim Wykes: Brixworth
Diane Ballard: Northampton

Valerie Pedlar
Membership Secretary

The first of a new series: LETTERS FROM HELPSTON

A TALE OF TWO PUBS – Part 1

THE BLUEBELL INN

'Dark clouds gathering over Bill's mothers...'

Well...! There's certainly been a dark cloud over Helpston since we heard news that The Bluebell Inn had been put up for sale. The Bluebell is in Woodgate, next to the John Clare Cottage, and thought to date from the 17th century; it is one of the oldest pubs in the village and now the only one left.

Devotees of Clare will recall that it was here in 1806 a thirteen-year-old John Clare worked as a 'pot-boy' for Francis Gregory, his kindly neighbour and proprietor of 'The Bell', as it was known in earlier years. It was here too, in the same flagstone-floored bar, that Clare, and his father, Parker, sang the old songs and played the fiddle all those years ago.

Fast forward to now and The Bluebell continues to offer a warm welcome to residents, ramblers and visitors alike. We understand that times and habits



The Blue Bell ca. 1910

change but the thought of dear old Helpston becoming another dry statistic is truly hard to swallow! The Pub is the beating heart of the community and an important lynchpin of our daily life. So: in January locals rallied and came up with an ambitious plan to try and save our pub.

This was our ray of hope; and within days a group was formed to try

and secure the future of our last 'watering hole'. Already a seven-strong steering group is in negotiations with the pub's owner and intend to raise the money through a community share scheme and grant funding. We wish them the best of luck.

For the time being I am pleased to inform friends and members that the Bluebell is open for business as usual for food, refreshments and B&B.

**The Bluebell Inn Woodgate, Helpston, Peterborough PE6 7ED
01733 252394 www.bluebellhelpston.co.uk**

Festival visitors please note: Friday 12 July – The popular Folk evening of Music & Song 7.30–10.30 pm will be held this year at The John Clare Cottage, Woodgate, Helpston.

Bessy Bains

150 NEWSLETTERS: A RETROSPECTIVE

As the founder members of the Society we are grateful and privileged to have the opportunity of sending you this newsletter, which, we hope, will give you some idea of the progress that has been made since we published our appeal nine months ago.

Thus began the first *John Clare Society Newsletter*, dated December 1981: four typed A4 pages, the last of which consists of a complete list of the '198 paid up members' the Society had already proudly signed up following the aforesaid 'appeal'. And when the newsletter passed its 150th number this Spring, 2024, 43 years later, it seemed a good moment to look back through the years, talk to our five surviving editors, and consider what the newsletter has achieved, and how it has changed and developed.

That first newsletter appeared just two months after the Society itself was founded, arising out of a popular WEA (Workers' Educational Association) course on Clare, tutored by the poet Edward Storey in Castor, near Helpston. The first number was co-authored by founder-members Brian Blade (Chairman), George Dixon (Treasurer) and Edward himself (who also edited the first two volumes of the *John Clare Society Journal*). The Society's first Secretary, Pete Shaw, edited the second newsletter, and Edward Storey took on numbers 3–5, finding, as former editor Rodney Lines puts it, a 'fluid, friendly, chatty tone which set the style for many future editions'. This was important: to find a style that could connect with members, who might range from casual to devoted enthusiasts, and could be nature lovers, literary scholars, local or worldwide readers, perhaps new to poetry. Each subsequent editor has managed to achieve this aim, although their styles have varied.

Edward Storey was preparing his 1983 biography Clare, *A Right to Song*, at this time, so after three newsletters he passed the editing on to Rodney, which he was 'delighted to do'. He recalls: 'I took over at number 6 and went on until my last, 24' (May 1989):

In those early days of a young society there was an air of excitement that Clare had at last begun to receive the attention that he deserved, and I was inundated with letters, articles, messages from journalists, academics and many new members announcing forthcoming concerts, WEA classes, BBC broadcasts, newspaper reports, both local and national, works by artists and actors, people's reminiscences of childhood in Helpston and so on. There was more than enough material for many editions to come, which was produced on an old portable typewriter on A4 paper and run off on an ancient Gestetner duplicator and stapled together with a green cover depicting Clare, designed and drawn by my wife, Pauline.

Rodney developed a nicely engaging style, offering a rich, varied diet of news, opinions, and information of different kinds. Among the articles that appeared during his editorship were several intriguing first-hand recollections, such as Alice Essex's memoir of 1918, 'My Clare Summer' (no. 6, Nov. 1983), or Philip Huniken-Lepper's 'Memories of St Andrew's Hospital', where he was a choirboy in 1920 (no. 7, April 1984). Poems inspired by Clare began to be included, such as Neil Curry's 'John Clare and the Acts of Enclosure' (no. 16, May 1987) or 'A Free Soul's Asylum Dream' by RC Beeching (no. 15, Feb. 1987), reflecting Clare's ability to spark new creative work.

In 1989 Rodney became Vice-Chairman of the Society, and he was succeeded by Noël Staples, who brought his own unique style to the newsletter. Noël's stint on

the newsletter (Sept. 1989–Dec 1990, nos. 25–34) ran to ten numbers and covered some key technological changes, from a typewriter to an early word processor. As he says, these changes ‘showed’. The first computer he used was very limited, but its ‘ponderous “chink chink” sound’ is ‘engraved forever’ on his mind, while the printer ‘sounded like a miniature sawmill’. He remembers the printer paper, which then came in one long perforated sheet. Noël was a social worker and was allowed to use the Social Services franking machine, reimbursed by our treasurer, saving him ‘one tedious job’.

As for the content, important things happened in those two years, one event in particular that was written up in the newsletter. Noel remembers it well:

Re-reading those ten early editions has been fascinating – the initial edition recording the installation of Clare’s plaque in Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey. I arranged the digital recording of the service by my late friend John Roberts, a retired BBC sound engineer. It’s John’s mellifluous voice you can hear narrating. Despite last minute changes it all worked beautifully.

That recording is still in circulation, and indeed Ronald Blythe, our late founding President, chose a key moment from it, Ted Hughes reading ‘The Nightingales Nest’, as one of his eight ‘Desert Island Discs’ when he was invited on the show in 2001.

On the process of looking back, Noël concluded that it was a ‘fascinating trip down memory lane after 30 years, remaking many connections! No Internet! No emails! Such a different IT world then! I moved on to edit our quarterly Quaker A5 booklet newsletter – like the current Clare Newsletter’.

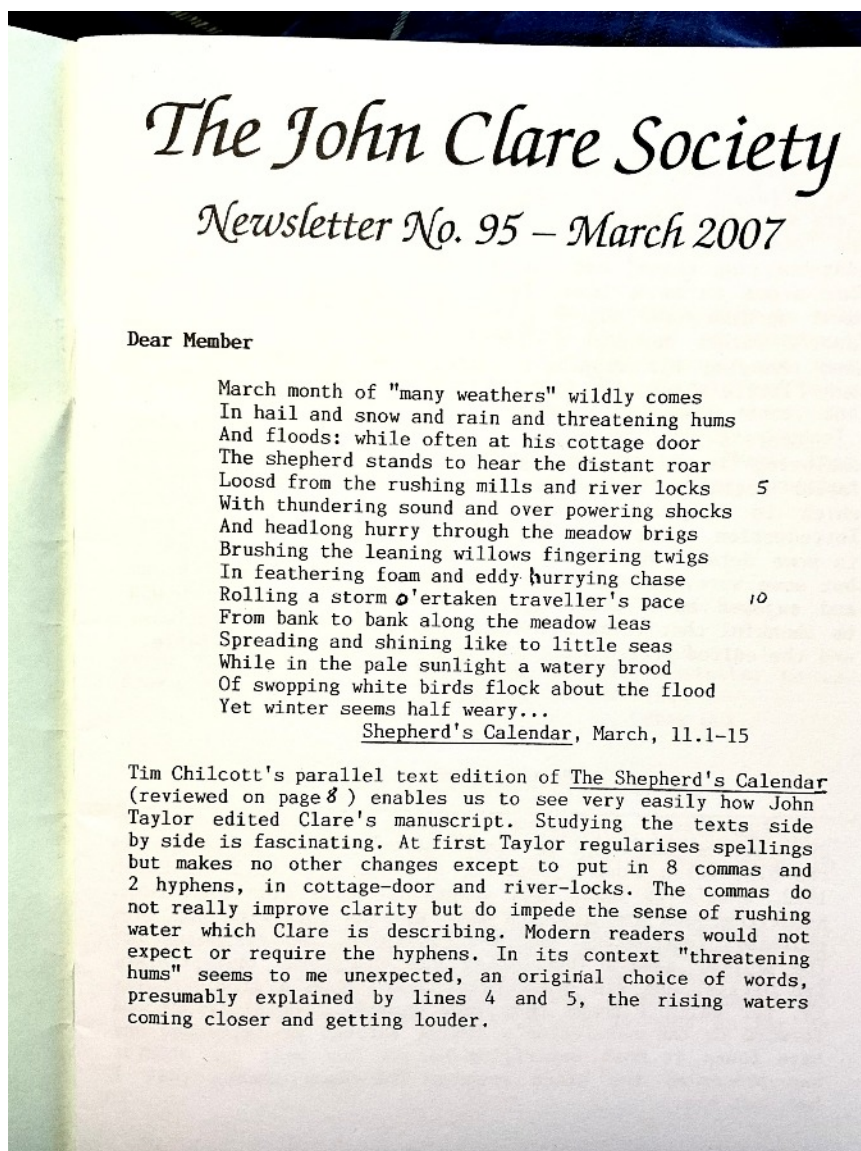


Three editors (Rodney, Noël and Peter) - three piles of newsletters, in the old A4 format
(**photograph: Noël Staples**)

The newsletter was next put into the capable hands of Dr Peter Cox, who edited nos. 35–95 (March 1992–March 2007). This was a very substantial tranche indeed, one that took us past the millennium, and saw the completion of the great Oxford Clare editing project. Peter, the longest-serving editor to date, remembers how the early newsletters had ‘eight pages, A4 size’ and a cover sheet which ‘showed a young Clare outside his cottage, and the threshing barn and church spire’. From

June 1993 there was 'a new cover design by John Lincoln, of an older Clare looking at a rural view with the river bridge and distant spire'. And in June 1999, the format was reduced in size from A4 to the 'digest' size of A5, much easier to hold and read, and much expanded in length from the earlier newsletters. Carry Akroyd's design was used for the front cover from the second of these compact numbers, and proved to be an image so attractive and appropriate for a miscellaneous Clare newsletter that it remains on the cover to the present day.

While the early newsletters began in the style of a personal letter ('Dear Member...'), as the membership increased it changed a little. Peter Cox favoured poetry as a way to lead into the main matter, and 'nearly always my newsletters began with a few lines of Clare's verse, with comment on them'. There were many contributions from members on subjects around Clare's life and poetry now, feeding into what Peter calls a 'companionable publication, linking the large and varied company of Clare-lovers to each other'.



Poetry for the people: from Peter Cox's final newsletter, no. 95

Perhaps the highlight of Peter Cox's time as editor was the bicentenary year of 1993 and the busy preparations leading up to it. There was a lot going on, as Peter remembers. In 1993 there were 'talks and events everywhere', and membership of the Society was 'rocketing'. As yet we had no online or email resources, but the newsletter gave long lists of events in every number. (I can remember updating these with the late Mary Moyse, our then Secretary.) Peter also recalls the spirited, if ultimately unsuccessful, campaigns to get Tom Bates's statutory of Clare placed into appropriate civic arenas (fortunately, some of his work may now be seen, for instance in St Andrew's Church, Northampton, and the John Clare Lecture Theatre at Nottingham Trent's Clifton Campus).

Dr Valerie Pedlar took over from Peter in 2007, editing the newsletter for nine years (June 2007-June 2016, nos. 96-127) until she was elected Chair of the Society in 2016. As with Noël Staples, her editorship saw important technological changes:

I felt it was necessary to move from paper-based production into the digital world and instead of physical cut-and-paste to its electronic equivalent; in effect to reduce the work of the printer since I could send print-ready copy. Thus I was able to produce an e-newsletter for those members who were happy to receive it this way.

Our newsletter had developed into a well-ordered and handsome publication, whether delivered on paper or in electronic form, and Val now needed to meet the challenge of finding suitable illustrations to add to the text. Continuity proved an advantage when Peter Cox, her predecessor, 'introduced me to a wonderful book of Bewick prints, many of which marry beautifully with Clare's work'. Val found that the other enjoyable aspect of editing lay in getting to know the contributors, for although 'we always encourage new people to submit pieces for publication, there have been certain regulars, and communicating with them and reading their work has been a great pleasure'.

Supporting this interest in the personalities of her readers and writers, Val introduced a series of sketches of 'distinguished Clareans', beginning with Ronald Blythe, in her first newsletter, some of these sketches illustrated by Vice-President Kelsey Thornton's attractive line portraits. A greater range of music and films, art, events and performances, as well as books were more fully reviewed now by a range of contributors. Among the more adventurous contributions printed during Val's time as editor was Tom Ryder's piece, 'Was Jimi Inspired by Johnny?' (no. 97, Sept, 2007) – on whether Clare's love of Mary Joyce may have fed into the great guitarist's song, 'The Wind Cries Mary' (1967).

Finally, Dr Stephen Sullivan took over from Val in June 2016 (no. 127), and has now taken us past the 150 mark – with the help of his doughty proof-reader, Dr Sam Ward. Stephen warmly remembers the kindness and hospitality of the Society's President, the artist Carry Akroyd, when he was getting started, which including the gift of a sheaf of drawings for his use. Like Val Pedlar before him, he realised he had to find a good way to illustrate the newsletter, and he found it through the thoughtfulness and sense of continuity in the Society's officers.

Leafing through these well-produced and attractive recent newsletters, as the Society itself moves deeper into its forties, I noticed at once a number of sad but celebratory obituaries to key founding members – those who set the Society in motion, such as Edward Storey and Ronald Blythe. At the other end of the scale, so to speak, we now print in full the children's poems that have won awards and commendations in the John Clare School annual poetry prize competition, which the Society sponsors. One-name societies tend to be over-stocked with older folk like myself, so it's lovely to see youngsters drawn towards Clare and poetry in this way. Besides the children's poems, there are always exciting 'before and after' accounts of the annual Clare Festival, in the June and September numbers, along with a regular diet of stimulating short essays and contributions by members and friends.

In the age of blogs and Tiktok, with a number of social media channels dedicated to Clare, the newsletter remains an important resource for all those who love the poet. We now have a number of sister organisations: the John Clare Society of North America (with its own annual newsletter and regular sessions at the MLA convention), the Langdyke Trust that cares for Clare country and the John Clare Trust that cares for his cottage, as well as the now well-established Centre for John Clare Studies at the University of Cambridge, with its programme of seminars and welcoming events. The newsletter enables information on all these and other activities around Clare to reach our members and, one hopes, to stimulate greater participation in events. So may it long continue to thrive. Perhaps the next stage –



following the technological advances Noël and Val describe – will be to digitise the first hundred numbers, filled as they are with much material of continuing interest to Clareans, and put them online for all to see (as we have done with our *Journal*).

John Goodridge

Some recent newsletters, with the cover design by Carry Akroyd. Note the different design for 2020.

SALES REPORT JUNE 2024

Total income for JCS Sales from the eleven months since July 1 2023 totals £1006.00, after postage costs. The figure in the February Newsletter was £576.58, although this was at mid December last year. The figure of £1006.00 is almost exactly on a par with last year, postage increases being a slight drag on this year.

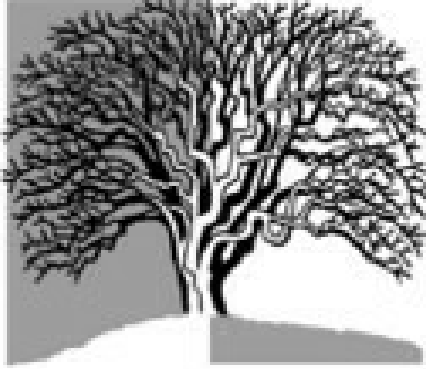
I won't repeat the sales listed in the last report but I can add that a small order was delivered to Clare Cottage in the New Year and in March. Some sales continued throughout the months to now (20 May 2024). Over this period we mostly supplied individual copies of our two 'Clare' books plus a small number of journals, bookmark and 'new' postcards. Happily, *John Clare Flora* is back in print and we purchased a number for stock and to cover a supply to Clare Cottage in April, which enabled us to get a discount. We also had to purchase some more of *John Clare, the Trespasser*.

We sent a review copy of both *The Wood is Sweet* and *This Happy Spirit* to a senior student in India and have received grateful thanks that the books have arrived. I hasten to add this is not, nor will be, a regular sending of review copy. I will await progress of reviews.

Unfortunately, I had to replace a copy of *The Wood is Sweet* to a UK customer because it arrived damaged; I also had to supply a 2023 journal as a replacement. However, the cover attracted a few additional sales which is good to know.

We are now a direct (but small) supplier to the Northampton Gallery and have several invoices due for payment. (Not yet received but due soon or will be chased, of approx. £47.). I may re-order *This Happy Spirit*, most likely after the July Festival. Luckily the print-on-demand system is fast. Also, we have sold the last of the *Collections of Songs, Airs and Dances of Clare* and will purchase another couple of sets.

David Smith



Langdyke
Countryside Trust

NEWS FROM THE LANGDYKE TRUST

Work across the John Clare Countryside to address the climate and biodiversity crisis continues to accelerate, with active projects in many parishes and with more landowners and farmers involved than ever before.

The project: to try to restore nature to the land of the north of Peterborough to how it was when John Clare wandered across it and wrote his poetry.

The work is spearheaded by the Langdyke Countryside Trust – a volunteer-led organisation which owns a number of nature sites including Etton Maxey Pits and Swaddywell Pit – referred to by Clare as Swordywell.

Key highlights include:

A busy planting season, with hedges, trees, bulbs and wildflowers planted in many villages and on roadside verges.

A new Langdyke nature site – the Christ's College Reserve – between Maxey and Helpston.

A new partnership with the Environment Agency to celebrate the Maxey Cut as a focus for nature recovery as well as a vital flood defence.

Several grants awarded as part of Peterborough Environment City Trust's '30 for 30' Fund.

Local landowners have commissioned a study to create a Masterplan of how the area might look like as a result of this nature recovery programme. The ambition is to create flourishing nature rich countryside alongside profitable, sustainable farming.

The Project aims to create an ambitious and accessible nature recovery area, famous for nature thriving alongside sustainable farming across the landscape areas west of Peterborough to the A1, south to the River Nene and north to the River Welland, designed, led and supported by residents,

John Clare Countryside is a significant asset to Peterborough and its people, with the potential to enhance biodiversity, the rural economy, sustainable tourism and to offer high quality green open space for the people of the city. It should be recognised as a key part of the city's future agenda, as a place for nature, sustainable tourism and recreation and commercial farming.

During 2022 and 2023, the project benefited from a substantial grant from the Government Green Recovery Fund, and was able to accelerate its work, particularly at community level.

Every parish in the John Clare Countryside has a nature recovery plan and the communities are now taking this forward both individually and as part of parish clusters, each supported by one of the key partners in the JCC project. The clusters meet quarterly, and the cluster leads also meet to discuss how we can work together, share best practice and identify funding opportunities

The project is actively supported by the major local landowners and also involves individual farmers and smaller landowners. Several hedges have been put in this year on private land, including along Heath Road, Helpston, and south of Top Lodge Farm, near Upton.

Local landowners are actively working together to see how more nature rich habitats can be created on their land. The new agricultural subsidy regime and other government initiatives to foster nature recovery is actively encouraging their plans for woodland planting, wetland creation and the restoration of nature rich grasslands. Already plans are being discussed for wetland creation projects and potentially for creating new habitats to link up the key wildlife sites at Barnack Hills and Holes, Castor Hanglands and Swaddywell Pit.

The landowners have commissioned a study to create a Masterplan of how the area might look like as a result of this nature recovery programme. The ambition is to create flourishing nature rich countryside alongside profitable, sustainable farming.

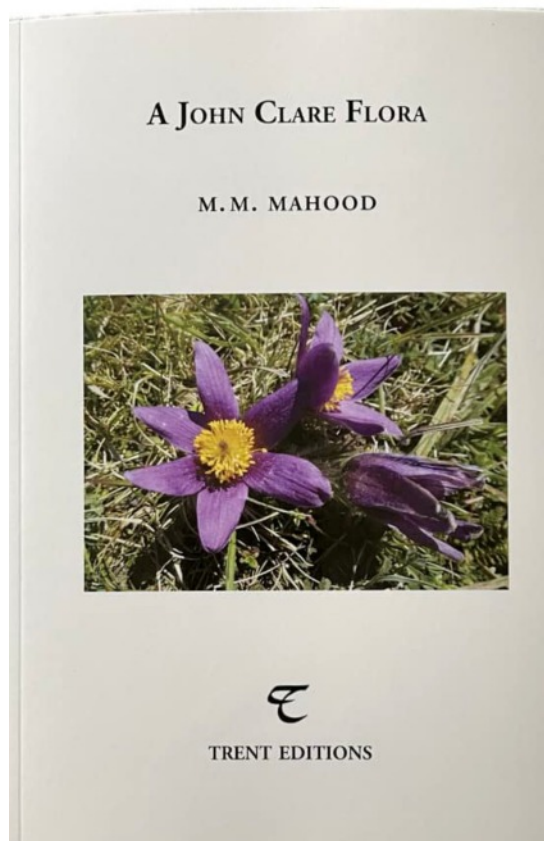
Langdyke Countryside Trust has entered into a partnership with the Environment Agency looking to the long-term development of natural habitats in the area around the Maxey Cut. The partners are focusing initially on creating an online trail that will help visitors understand not only the natural richness of the area, but also the management of the Cut itself and the rich heritage of the landscape, from the Bronze Age through to Westings Meadow, and the beautiful churches that can be seen from the Cut.

Langdyke also purchased a new 22-acre reserve at Christ's College Pits creating a new community nature reserve along the Maxey Cut. It is also creating a new visitor viewing platform with disabled access at its Vergette Wood Meadow reserve later this year and creating three new ponds on its Etton High Meadow reserve.

For further information on how to get involved, contact me: Chair, John Clare Countryside Partnership – chair@langdyke.org.uk

More on the Trust's website, langdyke.org.uk.

Richard Astle



A JOHN CLARE FLORA By Molly Mahood

Now **BACK IN PRINT**
And in stock with the John Clare Society

PRICE £15 plus £3.50 postage

To order, e-mail djsapt@gmail.com
David Smith, Sales Officer

Also available in John Clare Cottage, Helpston.

UNVEILING A BLUE PLAQUE FOR JOHN CLARE

It seems we have to thank Richard White for organising the creation and placement of a blue plaque in celebration of the marriage of John Clare and Martha Turner on the 16th March, 1820 in Casterton church (St Peter & St Paul's). It was to the Crown Inn, just across the road from the church, that they hurried. (I should point out that these days Casterton is known as Great Casterton.)

Richard, an enthusiast for Clare, was instrumental in arranging the plaque at the entrance to the Crown Inn, plus a couple of hours' entertainment by the folk group Frumenty. The unveiling of the plaque was at 3.30pm, Saturday 16th March, 2024.

Clare and Martha, just married, were able to cross the road from the church to the Crown for their 'wedding breakfast.' It was spring, they were newly married and John's first book, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, was being published and destined to sell its first edition quite quickly. An auspicious start, a happy time when clouds no doubt parted for a short time for John and Martha.

This March, 2024, outside at 3.30, was a small crowd of local admirers of Clare waiting for the 'unveiling' of the plaque. It was hiding, made invisible by a white board that matched the white walls of the Crown. Unexpectedly, Richard White was unable to attend and complete his endeavours, having suffered an accident and being confined in hospital. After hasty phone conversations the evening before, David Dykes was available to take on the role, which he did in the presence of all, including a reporter from Peterborough.

The plaque was revealed, and David gave a brief introduction to the period



of Clare and Martha's marriage, Clare's budding literary success and the soon-to-follow birth of their first child. David mentioned the quality and quantity of Clare's writings in poetry and prose as well as his decline and death in Northampton Asylum. It was not the time to examine the range of poetry, so David finished the session by reading 'The Primrose', after which we trooped into the bar in the original part of the Crown where Clare and Martha started their married life. Drinks all round and then Frumenty warmed up and

were away with their music and songs in appreciation of John and Martha Clare.

In addition to listening and watching the folk group I found myself in brief conversation with Steve Barker, landlord, and others as they topped up their glasses or propped up the bar. I enjoyed hearing all snatches of conversation, especially the snippets about Clare, his countryside or his activities. Including where Martha once lived, how they met and a little bit about the lime kilns where John once worked, and their owner.

I should mention that my enthusiasm for the Crown at (Great) Casterton went up a peg (should I say pint) when I discovered it has Bass on tap. This, for me is another excuse to pay a visit to the place as it is only a few miles from Clare's Cottage in Helpston.

David Smith

HAWTHORN

It strands at the field's edge
Keeping a grip in the thin soil
Against the sea-wind's pummelling.
All is tangle of twigs and awkward branches,
Salt-bitten leaves, made to lean inland.

Hawthorn holds no status in the hierarchy of trees,
An unconsidered presence, more shrub than tree,
Tough enough for hedging with its ends cropped
And rough limbs split and shaped
To make it functional.

Even so, when most afflicted,
I know its time must come, and so it does.
In late Spring, its brief majesty brings Summer in, transfigured
By a creamy canopy of white
In cushions of leaf green.

When, at last, tired blossoms fall
And rusting leaves are nursing haws to ripeness,
There's a quiet pride in that my hawthorn
Has just done what it was meant to do.

Mike Sharpe.



A selection of recent 'Chapbooks', available from Roger Rowe at arborfield@gmail.com

THE WORLD-WIDE CLARE READERSHIP

A very important signpost a few days ago in my 20-year effort to bring Clare's work to a wider audience; overnight I received the 750,000th visit to my Clare weblog – johnclare.blogspot.com. Every day of the year it receives visitors from almost every country in the world, from Singapore to the United States – often over 1,000 a day.

At around the same time, 20 years ago, I started a Facebook Group: John Clare Poet (13th July 1793 to 20th May 1864). The group has now well over 1,600 permanent members, and many interact with posts (or post themselves) frequently.

Also included on the home page of the blog is my interview (around 15 minutes) with our dear friend Professor Eric Robinson, which has now been viewed some 4.86k times. Filmed by Clarean James Murray-White outside the Peterborough Archives in 2014, it is a permanent memorial to the great man.

Ten years after these initial steps to publicise the work of our great poet, encouraged by Eric, I moved into the realms of publishing. In the time since then 'Arbour Editions' has published three handmade hardbacks, two paperbacks, and 28

chapbooks – all of these are still available from me: arborfield@gmail.com. I was going to photograph all these to illustrate this piece, but a 33-book photo seemed rather superfluous!

In addition, friends from Italy, Tunisia and China have now published Clare in Italian, Arabic and Chinese – I spent many happy hours seeking to find the right word for some of Clare's 'parochialisms' for these publications.

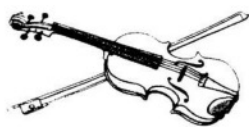
John Clare is more relevant than ever in these tumultuous days, and may be read for comfort, enlightenment, direction, beauty, historical fact, radical thought as well as being the first collector of folk-song and virtually the first environmentalist.

A genius of the first order – I continue to read him daily.

Roger Rowe



John Clare's Music & Song Session



7.30—10.30m

Friday 12th July 2024

**Traditional acoustic music
and folk songs**

**Come & play, or just to listen
John Clare Cottage, Woodgate,
Helpston PE6 7ED**

Raffle prizes welcome. Info: 01775 766923

<https://johnclaresociety.wordpress.com/>

THERE WAS AN ODD BIRD FROM MAURITIUS

If Edward Lear, bird artist extraordinaire and author of limericks and so-called nonsense rhymes, had written a dodo ditty, I imagine it would have gone something like this:

There was an odd bird from Mauritius
Whose fate was far from propitious
His looks were absurd
That unfortunate bird
Who no longer resides in Mauritius.

Although the nature of messaging in such doggerel might be considered prosaic and mundane, the message and sentiment per se is far from flippant or subliminal. By heeding the inherent enabling potential of environmental literature and nature poetry in particular, and by embracing its unique restorative power, we could all become better guardians of our home planet and all its inhabitants. This is the intrinsic essence of John Felstiner's book *Can poetry Save the Earth?* Subtitled 'a field guide to nature poems', which includes a chapter on John Clare.

Clare is indeed now well recognised as a pioneer poet of early nineteenth century eco-criticism, as exemplified by his 'enclosure elegies' of lament and dissent over the environmental ruination, as he perceived it, caused by the purloining privatisation of common land. Furthermore, by protesting the social injustices of Parliamentary Enclosure, these poems also testify to Clare's championing the rights of the rural poor.

John Clare witnessed first-hand the initial disruptive dismantling of the medieval agrarian ecosystem by enclosure, and one wonders what he would have made of our present consumptive lifestyle and the man-made crisis now facing our planet; perhaps he might reiterate that early admonishing accusation from 1820: 'Now all laid waste by desolation's hand / Whose cursed weapon levels half the land....Accursed wealth o'er bounding human laws / Of every evil thou remainst the cause'. These lines from 'Helpston', the first poem in the first, uncensored, edition of Clare's first published volume of poems, were a brave naming and shaming rebuke, given that suchlike 'wealth' might implicate his own aristocrat patrons.

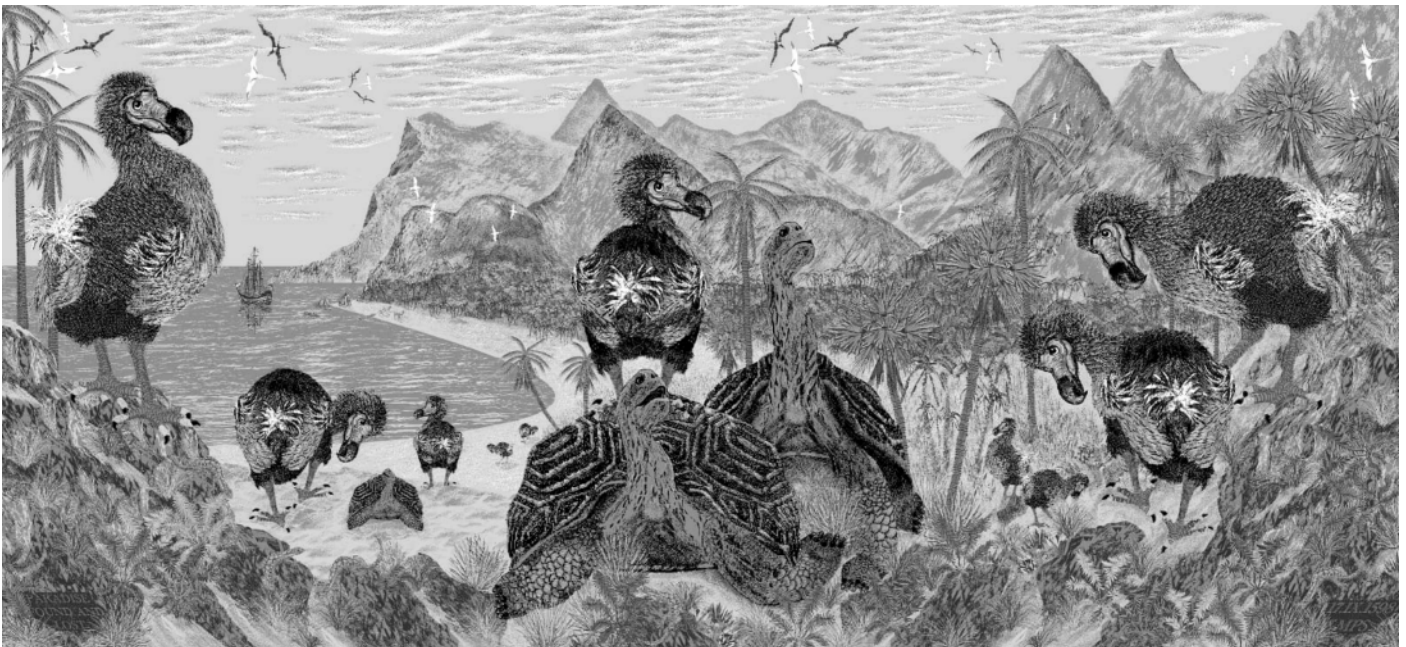
Although this is a vivid and succinct foretelling of our present-day crisis, needless to say the situation has changed inordinately since Clare's day, given the transformational changes in agricultural practices and the ongoing, unprecedented scale and nature of a worldwide environmental exploitation, destructive and unsustainable and evermore driven by a widespread incentivising wealth – an insatiable wealth which consumes at the expense of others, committing so-called collateral, global injustices against poor and disenfranchised indigenous peoples.

The list of casualties and causes is depressingly familiar, from fossil-fuel-driven climate change to habitat destruction by the likes of coral reef bleaching, deforestation and corporate mining and of course the environmental pollution of land, rivers and seas, by plastics, sewage and toxic agrochemicals such as insecticides, herbicides and fertilizers. The resulting ecological collapse and ecocidal loss of biodiversity is now driving the anthropocene's modern day mass extinction at the hands of the epoch's eponymous namesake.

Scientific opinion on the influence of human activity on global climate systems is now well established, given the exceptionally rapid rises in global temperature and the unparalleled melting of glaciers and polar ice caps, along with a manifest plethora of other evidential data. Indeed, early warning evidence of potential man-made climate change appeared as far back as 1896, when the Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius

first predicted that changes in atmospheric carbon dioxide could substantially alter global temperatures through the greenhouse effect. Regarding man's toxic onslaught on the environment, the alarm call was most effectively raised back in 1962 with the landmark publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, highlighting the devastating impact on wildlife of pesticides like DDT, thereby triggering the birth of the modern environmental movement.

And yet governments worldwide continue to greenwash, prevaricate, obfuscate and seemingly collude with lobbying vested interests, while the crime of ecocide remains to be recognised as such, by most nations including our own. Unfortunately, with record numbers of fossil fuel lobbyists and their financial backers attending recent UN Climate Change Conferences and the conflicting interests of hosting by fossil fuel-producing nations like UAE and Azerbaijan, there's been an understandable undermining of confidence in future COP meetings. In the face of these challenges campaigners and activists like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Extinction Rebellion and Global Justice continue to fight in hope for moral justice and common-sense actions: meaningful deeds not just empty commitments. 'Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul / And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all...' ; inspirational, albeit consoling words of Emily Dickinson.



Sometimes, when I visit Castor Hanglands nature reserve on an early summer's evening, I imagine the company of an eavesdropping John Clare jotting down onomatopoeic lyrics: chee, cheer, cheer, wew, wew, wew, chur, chur, chur, jug, jug, jug, echoing the calls of his beloved nightingales. Listening to this outpouring cadence, presumably from direct descendants of Clare's own birds, one feels a certain presence of the poet himself.

Alas the familiar incessant, rasping, crex crex call of the corncrake or landrail, another of Clare's favourite summer migrants, is long gone. Changes in farming methods, from the hand cutting of hay meadows to mechanised mowing in the later nineteenth century, along with the more recent use of insecticides and herbicides, has led to a loss of habitat and food resources for this ground-nesting bird, resulting in its total disappearance from lowland Britain. Encouraging conservation efforts have recently reintroduced the corncrake to the fenland's Nene Washes, not far from Clare's patch on Emmonsales heath. Furthermore, with major, ambitious habitat restoration programs like the Great Fen Project and the countrywide expansion of multifarious

rewilding schemes, there remains good cause for optimism for a more sustainable, enriched environment for humans and nature.

Worldwide several endangered bird species have been rescued from extirpation and extinction, through habitat restoration, captive breeding and reintroduction, including on the island of Mauritius, where the endemic kestrel and the pink pigeon were both pulled back from the brink. However, back in 1598 the future didn't bode so well for other native endemics, when the Dutch first landed and took possession of the previously uninhabited island. With no means to run or fly, within fifty years both the giant tortoise and the dodo had succumbed to the plunders of man and his predatory entourage of cats, rats, pigs and monkeys.

In the minds of many today, in addition to being an iconic, aphoristic symbol, the perception of the dodo also harks back to the delightful, cartoonish character depicted in John Tenniel's illustrations to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. It thus seems somewhat incongruous to portray this seemingly eccentric, outsized pigeon as a portentous harbinger of doom.

And so in the spirit of an Aesop fable, rather than just a lament or an impassioned rant, it just remains to conclude with a sobering verse and an imagined scene before the newly discovered paradise of Mauritius was lost:

You came for gain, usurped our reign,
Exiled us to oblivion's shore.
So farewell – futile contrition feign
Lest atonement wants for more.
Only time will tell, ere they sound the knell,
So empower your conscience wise.
Do take heed the bell, ere we say farewell.
Lest you suffer the same demise.

Mick Schrey

PS. The dodo image, originally commissioned by Ralfe Whistler, doyenne of dodo collectors, is based on a sketch from 1638 by Cornelius Saftleven and takes into account recent interpretations from skeletal remains suggesting that the dodo was a more agile, less docile creature than previously thought.

ALLIANCE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES

As most of you will know, the John Clare Society is a member of the Alliance of Literary Societies (ALS). I am the JCS representative, and recently attended the AGM weekend, which this year was held 17–19 May in Bowness-on-Windermere. Each year this event is hosted by a different member society in conjunction with the ALS, and this year it was the turn of the Arthur Ransome Society. These gatherings provide an opportunity to meet with people from a wide range of literary societies, to discuss common problems and hear about other societies' solutions – as well as learning about the literary figure represented by the hosting society.

Those of you who receive email communications will have received occasional messages from me that the ALS send out. Details of the organisation can be found on the website: <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com>

Valerie Pedlar

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

SALES ORDER FORM 2024



The John Clare Society, founded in 1981, publishes books, CDs, DVDs, pamphlets and postcards, an annual Journal and a members' newsletter every four months.

Please support our activities via this catalogue which also includes a small selection of other books and items on Clare.

You can email an order or question to me. We are able to accept online payment, also PayPal and debit/credit cards for payment via email. Orders by post and cheque still welcome.

Please include full address and ordering information on the order-form.

David

David Smith, Sales Officer

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B20023	<i>a JCS book:</i> John Clare: New Approaches rrp £7.95 ed. J Goodridge & S Kövesi ppr (essays on Clare)	£6.00	400g
B20030 *New*	A Meeting of Two Spirits Contemporary art by John Lincoln: Clare's landscape and poetry rrp £30.00	£30.00	1020g
B20128	Love's Cold Returning: Hall & Somekh ppr rrp £20.00 Detailed research into Clare's traipsing home from High Beech asylum	£18.00	900g
B20033	<i>a JCS book:</i> The Wood is Sweet Poems selected by David Powell, illustrated by Carry Akroyd ppr rrp £7.99	£6.25	200g
B20115	<i>a JCS book:</i> This Happy Spirit poems selected by RKR Thornton & Carry Akroyd. Ilusts. by Carry Akroyd Ppr rrp £8.99	£7.25	200g
B20113	John Clare, the Trespasser rrp £6.99 by John Goodridge & RKR Thornton ppr	£6.00	75g
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B20124	OUP: John Clare Selected Poems Ox. Std Txts. rrp £12.99	£12.00	300g
B20116	John Clare: A Collection of Songs, Airs and Dances for Violin (1818) ed. Tony Urbainczyk, vols 1 & 2:	Vol 1: £10 Vol 2: £14 Out of stock	
B20112	By Ourselves ed. Andrew Kotting Highly illustrated, Book of the film of Clare from Epping to Helpston...hbk.	£17.00	650g
B20118	Hidden Treasures (of John Clare) ppr. rrp £6.00 Both edited by. R. Rowe (Arbour Editions)	£5.00	125g
B20127	Drinking With John Clare ppr. rrp £3.50	£3.50	65g
B20030	The Ballad of John Clare by Hugh Lupton rrp £9.99	£9.00	312g
B20126	THE MEETING: Reading and Writing Through John Clare <i>a JCS book</i> ed. Simon Kövesi. ppr £4.00	£4.00	160g
B20122	Torpel Manor: The Biography of a Landscape by F Gosling, SP Ashby & A McClain. ppr	£12.50.	Post free
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1982-2019 Journal	As available (some no-stock years). Please enquire for years wanted	£2.00 each UK Post £2.50
B20125:	John Clare Society Journals, 2020, 21, 22 & 23 State which dates required	£2.50 each UK:Post £2.50
	Journal Index (1982-2011)	£2.00 post free in UK

MISCELLANEOUS/BOOKS/CDs/DVDs 2024

M20071	In Clare's Footsteps map of Helpston with notes laminated, folded to A5 laminated, flat A4	£1.00 £1.00	25g 25g
M20092	John Clare leather bookmark , gold on dark green.	£2.25	10g
M20031	JCS gummed labels 100 labels in pack.	£0.65	150g
M20028	Tea-Towel - Scenes from Helpston: High Quality Cotton	£4.50	150g
C2001	*New* The John Clare Rose, Blank Greetings card & envelope: 126x180mm. (a JCS card) rrp £1.75	£1.65	22g
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